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ABSTRACT

To consider the role of the physically challenged student in collegiate individual events competition, a study examined the results of a preliminary survey distributed to a sampling of forensic administrators concerning the presence, recruitment, and evaluation of such students in programs nationwide. Questionnaires were mailed to 113 directors of Individual Events Programs at a sampling of institutions who were members of the National Forensic and the American Forensic Associations. A combination of both closed and open-ended questions were developed which asked about: the nature of each physically challenged student's disability, recruiting choices, concerns as a coach regarding the needs of physically challenged students, concerns as a judge regarding the evaluation of the physically challenged performer, and suggestions/opinions regarding the role of such students in collegiate forensics. Fifty-two questionnaires (46%) were returned. Results revealed that while attitudes toward diversity in forensics are positive, the logistics governing its achievement are decidedly undermining. The financial costs associated with coaching these students may often be prohibitive. In addition, lack of training causes anxiety for many coaches; student-to-student relations and applying standard criteria for evaluation are also problem areas. (The questionnaire is attached.) (NH)

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CONSIDERING THE ROLE OF THE PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED STUDENT IN INDIVIDUAL EVENTS COMPETITION

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Henry David Thoreau once wrote, "He [or she] is the best sailor who can steer within the fewest points of the wind, and exact a motive power out of the greatest obstacles." For the physically challenged student in today's society, the removal of many structural and administrative obstacles to education is affording unprecedented opportunity. Yet in a world where the term "disability" is no longer politically correct and the label "handicapped" has become a pejorative, do barriers persist that work to discourage the physically challenged student from participating in activities laden with traditional guidelines and strict evaluative measures? This paper is an attempt to consider the role of the physically challenged student in collegiate individual events competition by examining the results of a preliminary survey distributed to a sampling of forensic administrators concerning the presence, recruitment, and evaluation of such students in programs nationwide. Through a discussion of the current findings, and an assessment of the value of future research in the area, it is hoped that the present study will foster self-reflection by the forensic community regarding the amount and quality of space it has created for the physically challenged performer.

RATIONALE

In his thought-provoking 1991 article, Bob Derryberry reminds us that "we who believe in the activity of forensics must continually ask important questions, queries which examine our programs and give direction for existence in the following decades" (p. 19). Research regarding the role of the physically challenged student in forensics is greatly warranted as our community continues to struggle with two significant issues in the nineties: (1) charges that many programs exhibit an elitism that discourages widespread participation, and (2) ever-increasing budget and administrative cut-backs.

Derryberry (1991) argues that "the total forensic program must remain sensitive to the problem of access in admission, theory, and practice" (p. 25). He concurs with Swanson (1989) that tournament qualifications, judging idiosyncrasies, entry level criteria, and specialized styles of presentation have created barriers that hinder total student involvement. Limited access to forensic

programs can also be attributed to a number of practices that discourage an open philosophy: programs that merely replicate secondary training by requiring high school experience as a qualifying prerequisite, tournaments that force beginners to compete against other very experienced or "seasoned" performers (Derryberry, 1991), and ill-developed recruiting strategies that often focus only on students from relatively educated homes (Sillars and Zarefsky, 1975) while failing to adequately emphasize the educational merits of forensics to the broader incoming student population (Twohy, 1988). Programs that emphasize prior experience and established talent over simple desire significantly reduce the pool of students from which new competitors are drawn, and this includes the physically challenged.

Perhaps more detrimental to the future of forensics are widespread budget and administrative cutbacks. Derryberry (1991) asserts that in some cases, programs that focus on a very limited number of speakers actually reinforce administrative expectations and contribute to the cycle of inadequate budgeting. Indeed, Garner (1991) maintains that in responding to trends affecting higher education, such as decreased enrollments, dwindling financial resources, and administrative apathy, forensic educators will need to be more sensitive to planning and meeting goals, and claims about the value of forensic competition. "It could be in future years that the forensic community's liaison with the community-at-large [will] be a critical source of validation for the existence of forensic competition" (p. 3). Forensic educators, however, must recognize that the community-at-large is a diverse population. Data taken from the most recent National Post Secondary Student Aid Study indicates, for example, that of the approximately 12.5 million post secondary students enrolled at the time of the study, 1.3 million reported that they had a handicap (1987). Given the goals set by Garner (1991) and others for the future of forensics, these demographics underscore the need for research that examines the relationship between the forensic community and the physically challenged members of the broader student population.

PROCEDURE

To begin assessing the extent to which physically challenged students are involved in collegiate individual events and identify issues concerning that involvement, a preliminary study was conducted in February 1993. A total of 113 questionnaires were mailed to the directors of Individual Events Programs at a sampling of institutions nationwide taken from a mailing list drawn from the membership directories of the National Forensic and the American Forensic Associations. Fifty-two questionnaires were returned and tabulated, making the return rate 46%.

The questionnaire sought to obtain demographic information about the respondent, the location of the institution, and the individual events program including national association memberships, size of student involvement, and number of physically challenged students competing. In all, questionnaires were returned from 25 states with multiple responses from Illinois (8), California (5), and Michigan (5). Fifteen schools indicated membership with both NFA and AFA, 17 schools with NFA only, 14 schools with AFA only, and six schools with Phi Rho Pi only. The number of students per program averaged 16 with eight schools reporting at least one physically challenged student among the participants.

In addition, a combination of both closed and open-ended questions were developed which asked for the following information: the nature of each physically challenged student's disability, recruiting choices, concerns as a coach regarding the needs of physically challenged students, concerns as a judge regarding the evaluation of the physically challenged performer, and suggestions/opinions regarding the role of such students in collegiate forensics (see Appendix A).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As coaches and judges consider the role of the physically challenged student in individual events competition, their answers betray a host of disparate reactions that raise key issues for the forensic community in general. Indeed, an analysis of the current survey reveals that while attitudes toward diversity in forensics are positive, the logistics governing its achievement are decidedly undermining.

For example, at face value those answers to the question "Would you/do you consider physically challenged students when recruiting?" were encouraging. Virtually 100% of the respondents indicated that whether they recruit or not each would encourage the involvement of a physically challenged student. Most cited "talent and desire" as the only criteria for participation in individual events programs. Yet responses to the subsequent question "Do you have any concerns as a coach about working with a physically challenged student in your school program?" reveal valid anxieties about the realities of achieving such diversity. Forty six percent of the those responding expressed concerns about the presence of physically challenged competitors including general mobility, the costs of providing adequate transportation for wheelchair bound students, and building accessibility. One respondent wrote: ". . . our squad room and our communication building are currently inaccessible--they both have <u>many</u> stairs and no ramps or elevators."

Concerns also emerge regarding the visually impaired student. Writes one respondent:

> [He] has tried a number of methods of transportation from building to building at tournaments. He asks other competitors and his teammates. We have tried to get volunteers to come along and help, but neither [he] nor the team can afford to hire someone . . . His teammates . . . are running to rounds and they don't have time to help him. So he does his best to get around . . . He has been lost in basements, been misdirected by students and maintenance staff to the wrong buildings, and fallen into a hole being dug out for a basement on a campus.

Though many coaches may welcome the opportunity to work with a physically challenged student, the reality of the financial costs associated may often be prohibitive. As one respondent lamented:

> My only concern would be if special needs . . . meant that we could need to spend a disproportionate share of a medium-sized-to-low budget on one person.

There are also emotional costs. Lack of training for coaches presents real anxiety. While virtually all of the respondents indicated a willingness to work with a physically challenged student, only 19% indicated having any previous experience coaching such a competitor. Of the 81% indicating no experience with a physically challenged competitor, some reported anxiety over the lack of information about the particular disability, procedures in the event of an emergency, and liability concerning the transportation of certain physically challenged students. Writes one coach:

> I'm more anxious about diabetics--timing for meals is so [crucial] at tournaments . . . After she had graduated, one of my former debaters died from diabetic imbalance because she passed out alone in her apartment. I'd hate to have to worry about diabetes or epilepsy because there's the potential for unexpected trauma.

The disparity between the willingness to coach a physically challenged competitor and the realities of doing so has the potential to greatly undermine the ability of many programs to welcome a physically challenged competitor. The survey reveals that while most coaches are receptive to working with the physically challenged, personal and financial concerns may prove subversive. My own experiences coaching physically challenged students (one with Tourette's Syndrome and the other with cerebral palsy), coupled with those detailed by other coaches, underscore this concern. One coach remarks:

> Coaching [this student] is very difficult. I wasn't trained to work with the [visually impaired] . . . How do you teach a person who has never seen a gesture what it is that a judge means when they tell him to relax and use his body? . . . [Impromptu has been a challenge because] I have had to devise aural ways to time . . . [and] in some situations . . . the quotations are so long that [he] can't remember them and they are not in Braille so that he can read them.

The reality is that a coach's anxiety may alienate or discourage the physically challenged competitor from continuing in the program. Whether implicit or explicit, frustration, anger, and impatience can be clearly expressed in the most guarded of moments. Writes one respondent: "We have never had a physically challenged student remain long enough to go to a tournament."

Results of the questionnaire indicate that the student-to-student relations are also an issue. Given the question "Do you have any concerns about how other members of your team would respond to a physically challenged student?", 11% of the respondents indicated some concerns for interpersonal relations between physically challenged and non-challenged teammates. Most coaches cited room assignments on overnight trips, reluctance to assist team members in dressing, packing, and other personal matters, and general negative team feedback as valid concerns. One respondent's experience gives credibility to these anxieties:

> At first, students acted very strangely toward [him]. They thought they needed to worry about him all the time and then they were embarrassed when he "imposed on other teams" . . . Over time, though, I think the whole team has matured about the whole thing.

Not only do directors have concerns in their roles as coach, but also in their roles as critic. Of the 52 respondents, 87% indicated that they had judged a physically challenged student during an individual events competition. Many cited the nature of the student's challenge as including wheelchair confinement, cerebral palsy, visual, hearing, or vocal impairment, missing or artificial limbs, epilepsy, Tourette's Syndrome, and muscular dystrophy. In responding to the question "Do you have concerns as a judge about evaluating a physically challenged student in competition?", 75% of all respondents indicated that they had no concerns while 25% expressed some concern.

Though the majority of the respondents expressed confidence in their ability to evaluate a physically challenged competitor, those with doubts give rise to some salient issues. Consider these responses:

> [I am concerned] that judges subconsciously grant to challenged students more lee-way or credit for performance beyond whatever allowances must be taken into account--the "sympathy" ballot.
>
> In interpretive events, if a student's voice is somehow [impaired], it becomes very difficult to apply the usual judgment criteria.
>
> I wonder if I'm being too hard or too forgiving for some individuals. Take persuasion, delivery is obviously an important element and, everything being equal, a . . . (traditional) student who has free movement and the ability to stand would have some advantage (nonverbally) over a student confined to a wheelchair.

Frustration over how to apply standard criteria to the physically challenged student in a competitive round can create anxiety that can undermine the best of intentions. Even those with confidence in their evaluative skills may encounter specific situations in which certain standards of evaluation come into question. Respondents remarked:

> Judging a student with cerebral palsy was a challenge because it was difficult to tell how much control he had over his motor skills. Thus, I was hesitant . . . to comment on his excessive use of hand gestures.
>
> In the case of the a hearing impaired student, the only category not applicable is vocal quality--should it count that much? . . . [At] a tournament the student "signed" the speech, while the interpreter sat, in the audience, back-to-the-judge, and [vocally] interpreted the speech.

> It was never a problem for me because I am very open-minded. However, I must admit when I judged the girl in Duo Interpretation doing "Children of a Lesser God" and found out she was really deaf, I felt a bit cheated. I felt perhaps she had an unfair advantage.

Questions such as these reflect the concern many forensics critics have as they grapple with the duties of evaluating the physically challenged competitor. The answers, while never clear cut, must be carefully crafted to protect both the integrity and value of the forensic experience.

CONCLUSION

While this paper has raised several issues regarding the participation of the physically challenged student in individual events competition, it is not meant to be prescriptive beyond its call for closer scrutiny. Yet respondents to the current survey echo each other in their call for some form of action. Most suggest that education is the key while others argue that broader criteria and standards must be established for the critic to employ. To address these concerns, further research must be done regarding the number of physically challenged students currently participating in all programs nationwide, the cost and availability of equipment for adequate transportation, attitudes of physically challenged students toward other competitors, coaches, and critics (including response to evaluative feedback), and vice-versa, as well as other concerns of the physically challenged competitor. In addition, the forensics community must challenge itself to address the concerns of critics (both lay and experienced) regarding the application of evaluative criteria during competition. With ever-increasing budget cuts and ever-decreasing administrative support, the forensics community must secure its future by working to reflect within its ranks the diversity and uniqueness of the community it serves.

While no one questions the willingness of the forensics community to work with physically challenged competitors, the disparity between the will to become involved and the realities of becoming involved cannot be dismissed. Yet as many who have had the privilege of working with a physically challenged competitor can attest, commitment to each and every student rarely goes unrewarded.

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APPENDIX A

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Department of Speech Communication

As the director of the individual events program at the University of Illinois, I want to gather information concerning the role of the physically challenged student in various individual events programs across the country. Please take a few minutes to help by answering the questions below. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential, so please be as honest as possible. I have provided a self-addressed, stamped envelope for your convenience. Please return this survey by March 1, 1993.

SECTION A. GENERAL ADMINISTRATIVE QUESTIONS

1. Your name _____ _____

   College/University_____

   City_____ State_____ Zip_____

   Phone_____

2. Are you the Director of Forensics at your institution? Yes _____ No _____

   If not, what title do you hold?_____

   How long have you held this position?_____

3. With which national forensic association(s) is your program affiliated?

   AFA_____NFA_____Other_____

4. Approximately how many students participate in your individual events program?_____

SECTION B. GENERAL QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Do you currently have any students competing on your team that are physically challenged (i.e.: visually impaired, hearing impaired, wheelchair-bound, etc.) and if so, how many?

2. Please describe the nature of <u>each</u> student's disability.

3. Would you/do you consider physically challenged students when recruiting? Y or N

   Why or why not?

4. Do you have any concerns as a <u>coach</u> about working with a physically challenged student in your school program (i.e.: transportation, funding, mobility, special equipment, meals, funding, etc.)? Please discuss these specifically; include any anecdotes that might help to illustrate (use additional paper if necessary).

5. Do you have any concerns about how other members of your team would respond to a physically challenged student (i.e.: positive or negative attitudes toward special needs, traveling, sleeping arrangements, etc.)? Please discuss these specifically; include any anecdotes that might be useful in illustrating (use additional paper if necessary).

6. Have you judged a physically challenged student in individual events competition? Y or N

   Please describe the nature of the disability of each student you have judged:

7. Do you have concerns as a judge about evaluating a physically challenged student in competition (i.e.: applying uniform standards of evaluation, timing, use of manuscript/interpretation book, vocal characteristics, etc.)? Please discuss each concern specifically; include any anecdotes to help illustrate (use additional paper if necessary).

8. Do you have any suggestions for how any of the above concerns might be resolved (i.e.: personal experiences, research ideas, examples, etc.)? Please be specific in your discussion (use additional paper if necessary).

9. What other opinions/concerns/ideas do you have for considering the role of the physically challenged student in individual events competition? Can you think of any other information that might be useful on this subject that has not been covered by this survey?

Thank you for your time. The information you have provided will be used in a paper to be presented at the Central/Southern joint conference in Lexington, KY, in April.